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ABSTRACT

Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) is engaged in an effort to put meaning behind the words "all children can learn" by charting guidelines for the work it takes to change urban education. The result is a decision-making strategy, the Urban Learner Framework (ULF), which focuses on the education or teaching and learning requirements of urban students and leads to systemic change in urban school districts. The case study of an urban student illustrates the mismatch between the capabilities the child brought to school and the school's ability to respond. The student had strengths the school failed to support. The ULF is a tool for making connections between the abilities children bring to school and the school's expectations for new learning. The new vision of the urban learner focuses on the following areas: (1) cultural differences; (2) unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential; (3) enhancement of ability through motivation and effort; and (4) resilience. The framework should be implemented in the school through curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff development, changes in the school environment, and effective management. Using the ULF requires changes in both attitudes and teaching styles. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

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CAN ALL CHILDREN LEARN?

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Can All Children Learn?

All children can learn! These words are often central to mission statements used to guide the improvement of urban education. But, too often they are just empty rhetoric! They do not truly affect educational practice for children in urban classrooms. Just writing words in an improvement plan has little meaning for those children whose learning experiences at home or in their communities are different from the ones most valued by schools; experiences that are poorly understood by many of us. The statement lacks substance because educators haven't really known how to translate the words into practice. Experience indicates that tracking, remediation, additional programs, and increased budgets haven't closed the achievement gap between poor urban minority students and majority culture students. More of the same certainly isn't the answer.

The authors are engaged in a long-term research and development effort designed to put meaning behind the words "all children can learn" by charting a very specific direction for the hard work and effort it takes to change urban education.* By critically reviewing the research, consulting with other educators, and testing our theories in educational practice, we are formulating an approach that could make a difference. The result of our work is a decisionmaking strategy, called the Urban Learner Framework (ULF), which focuses directly on the education or teaching and learning requirements of urban students and leads to systemic change in urban districts.

Russell -- The Life Story of an Urban Student

Consider Russell, an urban student. Read his story (see figure 1). Most of us working in urban education have known many Russells. In fact, some urban educators tell RBS staff, "I might have been Russell if I hadn't turned my life around."

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* The work discussed here represents a joint effort of all staff of the Urban Education Project at Research for Better Schools.

FIGURE 1

Russell: A Maverick? *

By the age of 18, Russell was a millionaire. He lived in a penthouse in Westchester, New York, and owned a Maserati, a Porsche, and a Rolls Royce. An entrepreneur, Russell developed an empire that employed over 100 ghetto youths. But his business was based on a commodity that was illegal.

Russell showed promise when he entered Thomas Jefferson Elementary School. He was a bright-eyed, attractive child of average size who seemed, at first, to enjoy school. He was eager to learn, despite his low scores on school readiness tests (i.e., he could not identify colors and had difficulty with the alphabet). He knew his numbers and his teacher described him as a "hard worker." Russell was assigned to remedial reading instruction. But he never caught up.

When school authorities investigated Russell's absences they learned about Russell's deplorable home situation. They had a hint of what was in store since Russell seldom was clean or neatly dressed. But they were not prepared for the the drugs, crime, and unbelievable filth that prevailed in the hotel where Russell lived with his four younger siblings. No one seemed to care whether he did his homework or lagged behind his peers.

In second grade, seven-year-old Russell reported that he liked school and tried to come as often as he could. His teacher described him as a "unique child" who was creative and stayed on a task until it was completed. She also noted that he worked hard and took pride in his

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* This is a composite view of one adolescent who dropped out of public school in NYC.

successes. But, as the years progressed, teachers stopped saying positive things about Russell.

He seemed to stop trying and fell further and further behind, especially in reading. Instead of academics, Russell began to place more emphasis on social interactions. This led to several negative incidents. In one, Russell was suspected of being the ring leader of a group that stole lunch money from other students. He was also involved in organizing a betting pool around intramural sports.

Because of his history of antisocial behavior, at the age of ten Russell came to the attention of the child study team. The team classified him as "emotionally disturbed" (ED) and he was placed in a self-contained class with other disruptive youngsters. Soon, Russell stopped coming to school altogether. The home and school coordinator had great difficulty getting in touch with Russell's mother, who, when finally contacted, reported that Russell had run away. Russell became another sad statistic of the Central Manhattan School District.

Eight years later, Russell came into the national news media spotlight when he was arrested as a major drug dealer. Over a four-year period, Russell had developed a significant drug empire. Until his arrest, Russell had built and managed a smoothly-run, undercover drug organization that eluded the New York City police for nearly five years.

Clearly, there are thousands of urban students with learning abilities like Russell's which are not recognized by the school. The most salient point about Russell's story is the mismatch between the capabilities Russell brought to school and the school's ability to respond. Russell had strengths the school failed to support. For example, he was eager to learn, liked numbers, and initially worked hard in school. He also displayed strengths in his life outside of school; he demonstrated creativity, motivation, and perseverance in achieving a goal. Russell's strengths

were not used to help him succeed in school. Instead, the school sought only to remediate his weaknesses and then put him in special education. Russell's talents made him extremely successful on the street, but his school experiences alienated him.

What could we do to make a critical difference? How could we build on the experiences of children like Russell and help them be successful in school? How could this mismatch be avoided? The ULF is a tool for making connections between the abilities children bring to school and the school's expectations for new learning.

Going Beyond Current Notions of Restructuring

Many researchers believe that the programs currently available for urban restructuring lack sufficient depth and will not significantly impact on current urban achievement patterns (Newmann, 1993; Ascher, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Haberman, 1991). RBS' partners in urban districts agree with these researchers and typically find the ULF a useful, substantive addition to other major restructuring efforts such as decentralization, site-based management, total quality management, facilitative instruction, technology, and curriculum integration. Urban educators have found that they must go beyond the accepted definition of "good teaching" and the idea that good teaching alone can improve the achievement of many urban students (Haberman, 1991). The ULF helps decisionmakers think systemically about the differences, experiences, and strengths of urban students which must be recognized and valued by teachers; legitimated and reflected in their curricular, instructional, and assessment practices; and supported by school environments which communicate positive messages and foster caring relationships.

Changing Mindsets on Intelligence and Culture

To understand the thinking behind the Urban Learner Framework, we need to re-examine our beliefs about the abilities of urban learners. The ULF and its change strategies integrate much of current theory and knowledge about the structure and development of intelligence and about cultural diversity and learning. While many of us were taught that intelligence was genetically determined, unitary, and fixed at birth, psychologists such as Howard Gardner (1993), Robert Sternberg (1985), and Reuven Feuerstein (1990) now argue that intelligence is multifaceted,

modifiable, and mediated by the cultural environment. While previously we did not recognize how culture (defined as the traditions, language, and daily experiences of the individual in the home and in the community) affected learning, current literature suggests how closely learning is connected to cultural experiences (Wozniak & Fischer, 1993). In sum, we need to re-examine our mindsets about the relationship of intelligence and culture to learning.

The changed understandings on intelligence and culture led RBS staff to a more positive picture of urban learners. Ask yourself, "How would Russell have been treated in school if he was believed to have been smart and able to learn? What if what he had learned in his home and community was valued?

Focusing on a New Vision of the Urban Learner

If we realize that the school failures of many urban learners are not the result of insufficient intelligence or lack of meaningful cultural experience on their part, then we can adjust our image of urban learners and help them obtain school success. That is what the RBS staff is in the process of doing. We have a new vision of urban learners in which they are capable, motivated, resilient learners who are capable of building on their cultural strengths. It is a vision that rejects current perceptions of urban students as being merely at-risk, unmotivated, and culturally deprived. Figure 2 contrasts the old and new visions of the urban learner.

FIGURE 2

CURRENT VIEW	A NEW VISION
• Deprived • Failing/Low-Achieving	• Culturally Different • Unrecognized Abilities/ Underdeveloped Potential
• Unmotivated	• Engaged/Self-Motivated/ Effortful
• At-Risk	• Resilient

Can you identify the characteristics of Russell that match the new vision of the urban learner? Can you recognize his underdeveloped potential and resilience in the face of adversity?

The new vision of the urban learner lies at the heart of the Urban Learner Framework. As mentioned, the ULF integrates the research of those social scientists who recommend that the cultural experiences of students should be understood and valued by educators and connected to new learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Tharp, 1989, Rogoff, 1990, Cole, 1985).

Understanding the Urban Learner Framework

To increase urban educators' understanding of the implications of this research, the framework focuses on four themes that provide a clearer understanding about the new vision of the urban learner. In other words, the themes provide the information educators need to know about urban learners in order to help them achieve the new vision. The four research-based themes are:

- cultural diversity and learning
- unrecognized abilities/underdeveloped potential
- enhancing ability development through motivation and effort
- resilience.

(see figure 3)

FIGURE 3

1. **Cultural Diversity and Learning**. Culture, defined by us as the traditions, language, and daily experiences of the home and community, is a more powerful explanation of differences between student groups than either genetics or socioeconomics (Banks, 1988). Cultural differences related to learning are not deficits. Educators should align the curriculum, instruction, and school routines to support the cultural strengths and learning experiences of urban students (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Tharp, 1989, 1992).
2. **Unrecognized Abilities/Underdeveloped Potential**. Intelligence is multidimensional and modifiable. New understandings regarding the role of

culture in cognitive development have clear implications for the need to transcend current thinking related to ability in majority and individual cultures. Educators should identify, develop, and support a broad range of abilities in urban classrooms (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985).

3. **Enhancing Ability Development Through Motivation and Effort**. Classroom practices currently reward innate ability. A new model of learning is required in which motivation and effort are recognized as important to learning as innate abilities. Schools and classrooms need to focus on meaningful learning tasks. Educators need to create environments in which students benefit from their learning mistakes (rather than being penalized by them), are motivated and effortful in their learning, and fully engage themselves (Bernal, 1992; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).
4. **Resilience**. Many urban children grow into healthy, self-supportive, responsible, productive adults despite the adverse conditions to which they are exposed, such as, violence, crime, drugs, poverty, and unemployment. These resilient people are stress resistant, hardy, and optimistic; they display characteristics of social competence, autonomy, problem-solving, and a sense of the future. Educators need to move beyond merely identifying youth as persons at-risk to treating learners as persons with resilience (Benard, 1991; Winfield, 1991; Rutter, 1987).

Implementing the Framework throughout the School

The decisionmaking framework integrates the new vision of the urban learner (as expressed in the four themes) with four areas central to the functioning of schools; namely, (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, (2) staff development, (3) school environment, and (4) management. Urban educators at all levels continuously make decisions in each of these areas. These decisions need to be informed by the research-based knowledge related to the urban learner.

Information found in the four themes of the new vision can help urban educators conduct needs assessments and prioritize strategies in each of these functional areas to guide decisionmaking.

Using the Urban Learner Framework to Guide Systemic Change

The RBS Urban Learner Framework provides a basis for recognizing the unique strengths and experiences of urban students and gives direction to major areas of school decisionmaking. While the ULF started out as a theoretical framework, it is being used in two school districts as a guide for systemic change. We are in our second year of working with educators in Washington, DC and Camden, New Jersey in examining the implications of the framework for their districts. During the first year, we were primarily concerned with clarifying the content of the ULF. Although we gladly accepted invitations from both districts to present the content of the ULF in staff development settings, we are clear that this effort was only one step toward systemic change.

Valuable information about the usefulness of the ULF is being gained from such staff development applications of the framework. In Camden teacher mentors from each school and in Washington, DC school-based instructional coordinators and central office staff attended training sessions conducted by RBS staff. This training created an awareness and receptivity to the ULF through structured experiences which modeled the teaching and learning strategies that build on the experiences and strengths of urban learners. The workshop series presented an orientation to the ULF and "turnkey" training procedures, the key concepts in each of the framework themes, and the principles of change. The teacher-mentors in Camden "turnkeyed" what they had learned to their school staffs during half-day inservice sessions for each topic.

It was clear from the participant feedback forms in both Washington and Camden as well as in a formal evaluation conducted in Camden that the training was well received. We routinely receive positive feedback on the ULF. For example, when asked, **how willing are you to use the Urban Learner Framework to help make decisions about urban student learning?**, three quarters (76%) of 108 central office administrators after participating in a workshop indicated they were willing to use the ULF. Participants frequently commented about the value to them of

the new information they gained from these workshops. For example, in the words of a Washington workshop participant:

> I'm not only willing, but also eager to "sell" it to staff. It's logical and reasonable and focused on the positive. It holds potential for negating our previous "habit" of complaining about what our students are lacking! I'm encouraged.

Data obtained from interviews with a sample of teacher-mentors in Camden clearly documents the appeal for many urban educators of moving from a "deficit model" for students to a new vision of the urban learner built around student's strengths. For example in the words of one mentor:

> First it's (the ULF) a major paradigm shift. Concerning the old, (it's) outdated how we view (how) urban (students) learn. I always knew a lot of this and a lot of things we talked about. Every child comes to you with strengths. All teachers who are effective and efficient know that. You just have to have the proper training, the proper experiences to give to the kids so they can learn. We want to work on the positive as much as possible.

Additional evidence confirming the usefulness of focusing on student strengths is the report of a principal who after attending a workshop on the ULF began asking her staff to name the strengths of students referred for discipline. Also, a Camden elementary school changed its disciplinary form to require the listing of student strengths as well as students' behavioral problems.

Recognizing the positive response to information contained in the ULF and the need to disseminate this information far beyond the audience with which we directly interact, the RBS staff produced a video overview of the ULF (featuring Russell) and a video guide that assists urban educators in using the ULF in school improvement planning. Viewers report that the tape has strongly affected their emotions and thinking.

As a result of RBS' staff development work during the first year in Washington, DC, the district leadership became knowledgeable about the Urban Learner Framework and its implications for school restructuring. The school district made a commitment to include the ULF as one of three major elements in their plan for school change affecting all areas of decisionmaking. Every district staff member will need to be informed about the framework. During this second year of implementation in Washington, RBS staff is offering a semester-long graduate inservice course on the ULF and strategies for connecting cultural experiences to lessons and activities in the classroom. This course will be offered as part of the district's Center for Educational Change on an ongoing basis.

During the second year of ULF implementation in our other school district site, Camden, RBS staff is participating in two major year-long activities. One, at a elementary school involves ongoing study, reflection, and dialogue with school administrators and an across-grade-level core team of teachers in order to better understand the cultural experiences of students and the essential connections that need to be made between this foundation and new learning in the classroom. This group hopes to co-develop instructional strategies that can be used in the classroom. Part of RBS' work with this school also involves research that seeks to uncover the out of school activities and interest of the students so that this information can better inform teacher decisions. This effort accomplishes two purposes, (1) ongoing professional development of the type that moves far beyond staff development workshops to the type of professional development necessary to foster teaching reform (Little, 1993) and, (2) development of concrete strategies to translate knowledge about the ULF into teaching-learning processes.

Also, staff are continuing to meet with the Camden teacher mentors representing all district schools. Proceeding in a similar fashion to activities at the elementary school site, RBS staff are working with the mentors to better understand the cultural experience of students and connections that need to be made between prior experience and classroom learning. These mentors interact with core teams at their schools. It is hoped that increased knowledge of the ULF at the school site will inform school improvement planning.

Feedback from activities in both Camden and Washington, DC suggests that educators often have not recognized that they may be contributing to learning difficulties of urban students by failing to connect students cultural experiences to school learning and that many educators who have received this new information are willing to change their practice appropriately. They see the ULF as providing both a focus, namely, the urban learner and a broader picture of systemic change or as one urban educator told us it is a "systemic approach to problem solving with a specific focus on realistic urban problems."

As we move through the second year of work with districts implementing the ULF, we are continually gaining insight from those real life tests of our theoretical base. We are expanding our focus beyond the staff development initiatives of the first year's implementation toward a systemic use of the ULF. The understandings we gain in our work with schools and districts help us to adapt the framework and better communicate it to those seeking urban school change.

Meeting the Challenge in Urban Districts

Not surprisingly, the RBS staff are finding obstacles to surmount in this path toward urban school change. Our experiences underscore what many others have found: urban school change is always difficult, complex, and long-term. We know that quick fixes, fragmented restructuring efforts, and add-on programs which do not focus on the learning experiences of students found in classrooms such as those described by Jonathan Kozol in Savage Inequalities (1991) and by Alex Kotlowitz in There are No Children Here (1992), will not significantly change urban dropout and achievement patterns. Along with our partners, we are encountering many challenges that are a realistic part of urban school change. We have resolved not to allow such factors to impede our progress and remain committed to finding what will work in typical urban schools.

The barriers to change that we have encountered during our first year of work include:

- **Belief systems**. Our experience in working with educators shows that the ULF requires for many a change in beliefs about culture and intelligence, the abilities of urban students, and the teachers' role. Since many beliefs and practices of educators are determined by early socialization, as opposed to formal teacher

education, changes in these beliefs will require focused, long-term attention. Supportive mandates by school leadership requiring change in practice (with appropriate training) may be a first step towards a deeper affective change. Recognition of the deep-seated nature of belief systems is critical to dealing with this challenge (Pajares, 1992).

- **Rules, regulations, and policies.** In some districts, the rigidity imposed on student classroom experiences by district, state, and federal rules, regulations, and policies limit reform. Regulations and requirements must be relaxed or waived in order for the changes implied by the ULF to flourish. We cannot connect learning to student experience if urban educators are required to teach to standardized achievement tests. Assessment and accountability must not be determined by achievement test scores alone, but by measures that gauge progress in alternative ways.
- **Multiple reforms**. Another barrier in urban districts is the plethora of improvement initiatives taking place which lack a central focus on urban learners. For example, many districts are simultaneously pursuing total quality management, site-based decisionmaking, and new curriculum content standards without ever trying to integrate the multiple efforts with the needs of urban learners. How can change be systemic under such conditions? The ULF can support other restructuring efforts and supply a common focus--the urban learner.
- **Sufficient time.** Unless the time can be found for learning and change on the part of all adults who contribute to the educational system, little change can occur. It takes time for educators to learn about the cultural experiences of urban students and to participate in the professional development that enables them to learn about the framework themes, new roles, and ways of teaching. It takes time to discuss the ULF with colleagues, parents, and community members. And it

takes time to make good decisions and to carry them out. The lack of time to learn and to produce change is a significant barrier in urban schools.

Creative solutions to these challenges that make urban change so difficult still need to be worked out in cooperation with urban educators.

Achieving the Goal

The Urban Learner Framework has been well-received by many urban educators. They recognize the importance of this organized presentation of the current research and theory about the teaching and learning process and the nature of cultural diversity. They realize that the ULF is not just another program promising an easy or quick fix. In the words of one teacher mentor, "This is not a program. A program has a beginning and an end,...a life span. This is a movement....we're looking at a distant light. We must not only change our attitudes about urban learners, our teaching styles must change also."

We at RBS and our partners are seeking to determine whether schools can use the Urban Learner Framework to develop a new vision of urban learners. Such schools may be able to provide educational experiences which allow students to achieve academic success without giving up their cultural and racial identities. The would-be "Russells" then can become life-long learners, able to acquire a desirable, wholesome, quality of life and able to contribute to the social and economic health of their communities. It is hoped that the ULF may become a vehicle for social change which will enable urban learners to become full participants in this society. With knowledge of the ULF, urban educators can put real meaning into the words: "Yes, all children can learn and we know how to help!"

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